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MEMORANDUM

October 24, 1962

TO: THE VICE PRESIDENT  
FROM: HB  
SUBJECT: A SUMMIT CONFERENCE WITH KHRUSHCHEV

A Summit Conference between the President and Khrushchev is probably inevitable. In terms of American public opinion, however, such a conference is inescapably dangerous -- to the public trust of the Administration, to public support of the Democratic Party, and to public responsiveness to the national leadership.

The seriousness of this should be kept before all concerned.

If at all avoidable, no announcement of a conference should be made prior to the November 6 elections.

Any conference, at this stage, freshens the public memory of Munich and, much more importantly, Yalta. This is not to be discounted. Virtually the sole impetus to McCarthyism in the '50s was American suspicion of Yalta. Today this same kind of latent suspicion -- a fear of "rights," "honor," et al, being traded away in secret -- is the core of the irresponsible far right and of the responsible conservatism. For a Democratic President to accept a conference at this point is to play with very, very dangerous fire.

It is almost impossible for a Free World leader to "win" a conference. This was demonstrated by Chamberlain. He had to come out of his confrontation with Hitler with something to show. Had he not done so, war would have seemed immediate and inevitable -- and he would have been unseated by an irate electorate. The same dilemma would rest on the President: to confer and acknowledge no agreement would preclude alternatives to war, and to confer and reach agreement would -- regardless of what was agreed -- lead the public to assume (1) appeasement or (2) irresponsible reliance on the "word" of a leader whose Ambassador has just been portrayed as a willful liar.

The prospect of a Kennedy-Khrushchev conference offers the very real danger that in seeking to win the respect of world opinion -- which is a more necessary factor than many military minds accept -- the Administration would come to the brink of losing the respect of domestic opinion -- which is a far more necessary factor than many diplomatists remember.

Reaction to the President's course has been highly favorable. Many have commented -- e.g., Senator Humphrey -- that the public feels a sense of "relief." In other words, action -- at last; not words. This national mood is not to be toyed with by a return, too soon, to words.

Objectively, it is not extreme to suggest that the very existence of the Democratic Party as a party of national leadership in the United States would be jeopardized by public reaction to a Kennedy-Khrushchev conference, short of an incredible Khrushchev capitulation.

It should be kept in mind that the greatest hazard of a Kennedy-Khrushchev meeting is the fact that once such a meeting is held, virtually all room for maneuver and delay is eliminated, just as it was eliminated after the Munich conference in 1938. Constructively, it seems most desirable that every effort be made to maintain a posture of willingness to talk while employing every rational device to postpone the actual conference. Among such devices which might be used are these:

1. A US posture demanding in effect that Khrushchev "purge" himself or his government of falsehood before coming to Washington. The President's speech Monday night was explicit in charges of Soviet falsehood. This probably made one of the deepest imprints of anything in the speech because of the parallel to American minds with the Japanese envoys who were meeting with and lying to Hull at the very hour of Pearl Harbor. At minimum, American public opinion will require that Kennedy's conduct in advance of a meeting with Khrushchev plainly reflect administration distrust and disbelief of whatever he comes to say.

2. The administration can, perhaps constructively and probably with safety, carry on a dialogue with Khrushchev at arms length by means of special intermediaries conferring with Khrushchev as representatives of the President. Unfortunately, this administration does not have a Harry Hopkins. However, such intermediaries should be outside positions of administrative authority and responsibility. For example, it would be inappropriate to employ the Secretary of State, the Vice President, or even the Attorney General as a special emissary to Moscow. It might be appropriate, however, to make use of someone such as Bundy.

3. As a factor in the strategies involved, the administration should weigh carefully the desirability of keeping Khrushchev away from the United Nations. The same also applies to Castro. The use of this forum by Khrushchev for any kind of anti-American denunciation will only serve to harden excessively American public opinion and American political pressure upon administration policies. It is most undesirable for administration initiative to be sacrificed for such a reason. American policy makers have considerable to gain by exchanging American travel to Moscow for Khrushchev travel to New York. If special emissaries from this administration to Moscow can keep Khrushchev there, then by all means use should be made of this technique.